



USSR: The Immediate Post-Brezhnev Policy Agenda ☐

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This assessment was prepared by the Current Support Division, with contributions from the Policy Analysis and Soviet Economy Divisions, in the Office of Soviet Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to the Chief, Current Support Division, on ☐

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Summary

*Information available
as of 15 November 1982
was used in this report.*

Initial statements and actions by the new Soviet regime indicate a considerable effort to project orderliness in the succession and a business-as-usual image. Although Andropov's first speech after Brezhnev's death last week sounded a discordant note, asserting that "imperialists will never meet our pleas for peace," his eulogy at the deceased leader's funeral on 15 November adopted a more moderate tone, specifically reiterating the regime's intention to seek a relaxation of international tension. The need to fill vacancies in the Politburo and Secretariat can be expected to introduce contention among ambitious leaders seeking to improve their position in the present fluid political situation. Some may take opportunistic positions on various issues which they later will change; others may abandon positions they have long professed to support. Even a smoothly functioning Politburo is unlikely to be content simply to conduct "Brezhnevism without Brezhnev." ☐

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The first item on the new leaders' agenda will be putting together the policymaking team. Once this has been accomplished, the new team will turn to some immediate economic issues. In the next few months, the leadership will be compelled to grapple with a host of complex domestic and foreign policy problems that accumulated as Brezhnev's ability to provide effective leadership slipped away. ☐

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**The Immediate Task: Putting Together the
Policymaking Team**

Key personnel decisions will be at the top of the Politburo agenda in the coming days. While the speed of Andropov's selection as party leader suggests that the leadership is sufficiently united for the present to avoid political stalemate, an unusually large number of important vacancies in key institutions must be filled, and the process is likely to generate political tension and conflict. These positions will be filled by members of the current top leadership, creating additional important vacancies in their wake. The cumulative effect of these changes will provide an early measure of Andropov's ability to consolidate his position in the leadership. []

To judge from his initial fast start, Andropov is almost certainly attempting to move promptly to fashion a leadership collective that is responsive to his political and policy aims. Unlike the transition period following Khrushchev's ouster, when a group of conspirators—all ambitious and in their political prime—had to divide up the spoils, Andropov would appear to face little strong competition from any political rivals among his colleagues. His apparent ease in elbowing aside his rival, Chernenko, suggests that the latter was not able to develop a strong power base independent of Brezhnev—although Chernenko's willingness to sound different themes at the outset suggests that underlying differences on substantive matters persist and that he probably has some support. Party Secretary Kirilenko's reported removal eliminates another major political rival, and none of the younger members of the leadership who might aspire to the top party post (such as regional party leaders Shcherbitskiy, Grishin, or Romanov) appear to be in a position to offer a serious challenge to Andropov at present. Two of the most influential figures remaining in the Politburo, Defense Minister Ustinov and Foreign Minister Gromyko, reportedly have close ties to Andropov. A number of reports had indicated that he had their support, and he is likely to see that their influence is protected in the new leadership lineup. []

Andropov's meeting with Vice President Bush on 15 November indicates that he is already moving to establish himself as the dominant regime spokesman in foreign policy. This demonstration of his political strength also raises the possibility of his taking over Brezhnev's job as president. []

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It still seems probable, however, that other leaders would hesitate to confer both posts on Andropov from the outset and therefore would deny him the presidency—a post Brezhnev held only for the last five years. One of the remaining senior Politburo members close to Andropov may be named to the post. Gromyko, for instance, would appear to be a strong candidate in view of his lengthy experience in foreign affairs and his ties to Andropov. []

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The leadership also will be filling a number of other key posts. Restaffing the party Secretariat appears to be the most urgent task. Andropov's elevation and Kirilenko's political demise (he apparently has been removed from the Politburo and Secretariat) will leave two important vacancies—the senior secretary for ideology and propaganda, a role Andropov evidently had played since rejoining the Secretariat in May, and Kirilenko's position as senior secretary for heavy industry. In addition, Party Control Committee Chairman Arvid Pelshe—at 83 the oldest member of the leadership—also has been ill recently and, according to an unconfirmed rumor, died on 12 November. Although the importance of his committee has waned in recent years, its function—the maintenance of discipline in party ranks—is important, and a younger leader might be able to make it a significant power base. []

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Several candidates have been tagged for advancement:

- Party Secretary Dolgikh has been filling in for Kirilenko since his illness this summer, and his promotion to Politburo candidate in May appeared to be in anticipation of his eventual assumption of Kirilenko's responsibilities.

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- Ukrainian party boss Shcherbitskiy is said to be close to Andropov and to have supported his nomination of the new KGB chief, against some opposition from Brezhnev's protege, Chernenko []

In filling all these positions at the center, new vacancies will be created in lower ranking posts that will have to be staffed by younger leaders who are now members of the ruling elite. For the first time in many years, a substantial renovation of the leadership appears to be under way, creating the opportunity for Andropov and his associates to shape the next generation of Soviet leaders. []

Economic Issues Facing the New Leaders

With economic problems pressing from every quarter, the new regime may opt to act sooner rather than later to establish clearly the direction of both its domestic and foreign economic policies. The meetings of the Supreme Soviet, now set to open 23 November, and the US-USSR Trade and Economic Council on 17 November, provide the opportunity for the leadership to enunciate any policy modifications. []

The main issues requiring immediate leadership attention are the state of the 11th Five-Year Plan (1981-85) and the state of East-West economic relations. Because the poor performance of the economy has put the goals of the five-year plan out of reach, the new leadership could surface major revisions in the targets for the remaining three years of the plan. Such revisions, if they occur, could indicate whether and to what degree Andropov has already consolidated his position as well as whether Moscow intends to alter its resource allocation policy between guns and butter. This latter issue has become increasingly contentious over the last year or so, with elements of the military arguing for an even greater share of the resource pie. []

There is ample precedent for a new Soviet leader to support consumer-oriented policies during the initial stages of his regime. Andropov has the opportunity publicly to demonstrate serious support for the consumer, perhaps by increasing resources committed to housing and stepping up meat production goals. A major initiative in this direction would be to increase foreign purchases of meat and grain above the rather low levels of recent months. []

Moscow must also decide whether to let the deterioration in US-Soviet economic relations that has occurred in recent years continue or to signal an intent to pursue closer ties with the United States. A large purchase of US grain and a move to renew the Long-Term Agreement for another five years could provide such a signal. If the leadership wishes to make such a signal, it could use the platform provided by the meetings of the US-USSR Trade and Economic Council []

Over the longer term, the new Soviet leadership must tackle the issues of resource allocation and management of the economy. Specifically, Andropov must decide (1) whether to continue Brezhnev's agricultural policies, which have consumed so much of Soviet investment resources; (2) whether the country can, and should, step up the pace of investment in the last half of the 1980s, perhaps at the expense of some slowdown in defense spending; and (3) whether the system can or should institute any managerial reforms. Before these decisions can be made, however, a consensus will have to be reached on how best to revive economic growth in the Soviet Union. Some argue that the road to growth is through the incentives that more consumer goods and services provide. Others maintain that more investment in heavy industries is the proper route. Andropov's closest ties in the leadership have been to those who advocate this latter course. []

The Andropov Politburo also will be forced to contend with a growing sense of malaise in Soviet society. The sources of popular discontent—a perceived decline in the quality of life, continuing restrictions on freedom of expression and belief, and rising national consciousness among some of the more than 20 major ethnic groups—pose problems of varying severity for the leadership. Discontent over the quality of Soviet life and stagnation in production of consumer goods probably represents the most immediate and important challenge because it strikes at the heart of plans for improving the economy through increased productivity. Although past regime actions—such as massive imports of grain—indicate that Soviet leaders are aware of such problems, their policies have as yet been inadequate to solve them. []

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Foreign Policy Issues

In the area of foreign economic relations, the new leaders must come to grips with the question of how dependent they want to be on Western goods, particularly farm products and technology. This issue is tied closely to their domestic investment policy. For example, continued purchases of Western farm products on the scale of recent years might facilitate some cutback in investment resources committed to agriculture. Unless the West becomes more willing to increase its levels of lending, however, the USSR will have to find new ways to generate foreign exchange. For example, allowing direct Western participation in, or equity financing of, resource development projects might become an attractive means of developing new hard currency export markets, particularly since such participation would also ease the strain on domestic investment. []

The new Soviet leaders are inheriting a situation in which relations with the United States are at a low ebb and policy toward Europe and China has been the focus of increasing attention. In Europe, INF is the urgent issue. With US missile deployments scheduled to begin next year and the West German elections approaching, the Soviets are likely to be engaged in a review of their INF strategy and assessing the relative emphasis to be placed on threats and concessions in the next few months. []

Relations with China will also be a priority concern of the new leadership in the next few months. In his final days, Brezhnev publicly emphasized the potential for gain in improving Sino-Soviet ties. The new leaders will wish to continue Brezhnev's emphasis and signal their own commitment to maintaining dialogue with the Chinese. They could make a tactical gesture such as a token military withdrawal from the border prior to commencement of the second round of Sino-Soviet talks early in the new year. In any case, an issue that brooks no delay is how far to go in meeting the Chinese for a significant improvement in relations. []

Among issues related to bilateral US-Soviet ties, imminent US announcements on the basing mode for the MX missile are likely to require the new Soviet leaders to make a public response. They probably will respond with the hardline rhetoric characteristic of Brezhnev's final months. They realize, however, that

the timing of this announcement is unrelated to Brezhnev's death and will not see it as a US attempt to test them. []

The Soviet leaders may hope that the release of Solidarity leader Walesa in Poland, Andropov's reception of Vice President Bush, and perhaps other gestures in the near future, will set the scene for a possible relaxation of US sanctions. The Soviets will be interested in seeing whether the US response will signal a desire to begin improving bilateral relations. At the same time, they are likely to be wary of reacting too eagerly to such a US move lest such a reaction appear to demonstrate their susceptibility to Western economic leverage. []

The new leadership will also look upon their relations with Eastern Europe as a high-priority concern. The Polish regime's ability to stifle the demonstrations and strikes scheduled for 10 November almost certainly has convinced the Soviets that the worst is past in Poland. Still, the USSR's cutbacks in oil deliveries to several of its East European client states and the persistence of East European economic difficulties assure continuing problems for the Soviets in a region which they regard as crucially important to their security. A meeting of the Warsaw Pact's Political Consultative Committee, tentatively scheduled for December, may be used by the Soviets to assure their allies that their concerns will be addressed. []

The new Soviet leaders will want to reassure their allies and clients in the Third World of continuing support. The Soviets probably see little chance for near-term improvement of their position in the Middle East. In Asia, relations with Vietnam and India will remain the chief Soviet concerns. In Africa, the Soviets will reaffirm support for Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique. Moscow's alliance with Havana will, of course, remain the centerpiece of Soviet policies in Latin America. []

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